



Review

# Hangover of colonial masters in V.S. Naipaul's *Bend in the River*

Priyansh Ranbir and Vivaan Uthkarsh

Ajagara, Banaras Hindu University Campus, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh 221005, India

Accepted 2 March 2016

*A Bend in the River* is a pessimistic novel about Africa which presents the obvious corruptibility of mankind. Salim, the narrator is a Muslim whose family has lived in a resilient colonial coop up in Africa for hundreds of years. Being an outsider, he ultimately realizes that his meaningful life is almost at its end and he must give up everything. The characters in this novel are alien immigrant minorities uprooted from their homeland. Agony of an outsider is the theme of this novel. Naipaul here seems to have developed the understanding that the feeling of alienation, homelessness, ambivalence and meaninglessness haunt not only displaced Indian in Trinidad but also the diasporic people in all the colonial societies. The protagonist is living in a colonial hangover world from there he made an attempt to break the colonial jail which is too strong to be broken.

**Keywords:** Identity crisis, Ambivalence, Postcolonial, Diaspora and Ethnicity.

## INTRODUCTION

V.S. Naipaul is one of the eminent Caribbean writers in English literature. He has been a great novelist and travel – writer. He is a novelist of distinction, an international figure and exceptional in that matter. No other writer in the third world can excel him in quality and quantity. While awarding Naipaul the Nobel Prize for literature in 2001, the Swedish Academy praised his work “for having united perspective narrative and incorruptible scrutiny in works that compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories.” The committee added, “Naipaul is a modern philosopher, carrying on the tradition that started originally with “letters persons” and “candid”. In a vigilant style, which has been deservedly admired, he transforms

rage into precision and allows events to speak with their own inherent irony.” The committee also noted Naipaul’s affinity with the Polish – born British author of *Heart of darkness*, Joseph Conrad: “Naipaul is Conrad’s heir as the annalist of the destinies of empires in the moral sense: what they do to human beings. His authority as a narrator is grounded in the memory of what others have forgotten, the history of the vanquished.”

At the very outset the colonies were not the structure of governance over native races. The main purpose of the colonial was not to rule the natives. Actually, colonies used to be only settlement by communities seeking a better life. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century,

however, the settlers, rather than mingling into native races /culture, retained their „original“ (European) difference. Though they were living away from their motherland, yet they considered England or Europe as their „Home“. They began to look the native as different (other) from the „settlers“ or „colonizer“.

With the passage of time, these colonizers began to harm and destroy the native populations. They started showing their domination over the native. Thus, the colonizers were a big threat to the indigenous people. It is here that the very first time the full import and structure of „colonialism“ begins to be visible. Colonization was invariably the violence perpetuated upon the natives by the European settlers. In this way it is clear to say that colonial is the process of settlement by Europeans in non-European spaces. Migrations are as old as the presence of humankind on earth. Colonization in the eighteenth and nineteenth century meant a violent appropriation and exploitation of native races and spaces by European powers.

Colonialism cannot be seen merely as apolitical or economic „condition“: it was a powerful cultural and epistemological conquest of the native populations. The European got knowledge over native through translation and academic study before either destroying it or modifying native system of thinking. . It must, rather, be seen as a powerful mode of exploitation based on the difference in race, culture, forms of knowledge, technological advancement and political systems.

Then they announced that these Indian texts and cultures were primitive, irrelevant, and completely out of date. With such solid knowledge system, they argued, India could never progress. In the next moment they substituted English as the medium of instruction, as the language of knowledge itself, they argued that English and European culture alone could ensure equality, liberty, development, and modernization.

This has not only altered the physical and political conditions of the colonized land; the affects were much deeper and intense. It wounded and distorted the „soul“ of the colonized people. He writes about how these people are left devastated and confused when suddenly they are left free in a world they do not recognize. The „modern“ world was never modern to them; modernity remained just a matter of words. Colonization has uprooted people from their own roots in such a way that these people failed to relate themselves to anything afterwards, even after the colonizers left. They remained strangers in their own land.

The actions taken by the colonizers were to break the spirit of the colonized people. They made the colonized feel and believe that the white people were superior; every other races were inferior and to be dominated. Everything good belonged to the Westerners; everything else falls under the category of the „Other“. Edward Said adds further insight to our understanding as he writes

“Independence was for whites and Europeans; the lesser or subject peoples were to be ruled; science, learning, history emanated from the West” (Said 23). The colonized people were made to believe everything bad, barbarous and mysterious was for the non-Westerns and they needed to be „civilized“.

There is no use looking for other, non-imperialist alternatives; the system has simply eliminated them and made them unthinkable. The circularity, the perfect closure of the whole thing is not only aesthetically but also mentally unassailable (*Said 23*).

This was the mindset that the colonizers inflicted upon the colonized. The colonizers not only captured on their lands and properties, they enslaved the non-white people. They would make the colonized people serve for their purpose, for their benefits. Their entire culture, tradition, ritual and religion everything has been replaced by that of the colonizers. The colonized were forced to cut themselves off from everything that fabricated their existence and adapt to the life style of the colonizers. They were made to believe that the colonized people did not have any culture; they were not born with one. As if they just sprouted out of no-where and there were the colonizers actors to be their saviors. Therefore, the colonizers had left the colonized people no choice but to embrace whatever was being offered. The proverb „I think, therefore I exist“ did not apply to the colonized people because their thinking capacity was destroyed and overtaken by the colonizers; they could no longer rationalize.

The mental breakdown that the colonizers did was slow and steady but poisonous. One by one they slowly managed to penetrate through everything that encapsulated the lives of the colonized and molded these people into what the colonizers wanted them to become. This they usually did following the two techniques: the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA).

The colonizers had set up educational institutions and forcefully convinced the colonized people to send their children in the colonial school. They targeted the children mostly because the mind of a child was fragile and could be easily shaped. They wanted the colonial child to grow up with the ideologies of the colonizers and thus be their prisoner forever. After family, educational institutions served as one of the fundamental factors that curved the ideologies of a person. In the colonial schools children very basics, their building blocks grew up with the English ideologies of the colonizers. They were taught the culture of the West and enforced to follow them so that these children slowly move away and finally forget their own culture and traditions. Ngugi Wa Thiong“o writes:

The most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture of how people perceived

themselves and their relationship to the world (442). Thus a colonial child was “being made to stand outside himself to look at himself” (443).

All these were done in a way which convinced the colonized people that whatever the colonizers were doing was for their own good. The colonizers had façade their own purpose behind all these and pretended to help the „uncivilized“ people.

The final hit that the colonizers made was to attack on the native language. The purpose of colonial education was to build up an environment where English would be the only medium of communication. According to the colonizers the natives did not have any language; all they had were dialects, „frenzy“. If they had a voice it was of „silence“. Therefore, grabbing control over the language was like having ultimate power over the natives because then the colonizers would be able to monitor everything the natives said and did, thus having access over their lives. “Language is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture” (Thiong’o 439), it was the only means through which the natives could relate to each other in a spiritual level because “language was the means of the spiritual subjugation” (437). With one’s language can only one express properly, the intonation and voice that can be properly used to express one’s emotion in the mother tongue cannot be justified by any foreign language. Thiong’o agrees when he writes “the differences really were in the use of words and images and the inflexion of voices to affect different tones” (437). Thiong’o also argues:

Communication between human beings is also the basis and process of evolving culture. In doing similar kinds of things and actions over and over again under similar circumstances, similar even in their mutability, certain patterns, moves, rhythms, habits, attitudes experiences and knowledge emerge. Those experiences are handed over to the next generation and become the inherited basis for their further actions on nature and on themselves. (440)

The colonizers made sure every child obeyed their command. Therefore caught speaking in the native language was one of the most humiliating experiences the child had to go through. The colonizers left no stones unturned to shatter the souls of the native people. They were only happy when these natives lost their capability to relate to anything around them and had any power left to think of their own. They constantly needed the guidance of other men, the colonizers. Thiong’o writes:

The most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control through culture, of how people perceived

themselves and their relationship to the world. For colonialism this involved two aspects of the same process: the destruction or the deliberate undervaluing of a people’s culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, orator and literature, and the conscious elevation of the language of the colonizers. The colonizers did all of that. The natives became stranger on their own land. (442)

The story of the novel, *A Bend in the River*, took place in a town at the bend of a great river in a newly-independent African nation which just escaped from British’s domination, and was narrated by the main character – Salim. Obviously, Naipaul wanted to emphasize the conflict between two cultures – Western culture versus subaltern culture. He also shows the contradiction in a postcolonial world by Salim’s point of view. In this paper, the researcher will explore and discuss this story by using postcolonialism because the theme of this story mainly concentrated on the relationship between the colonial culture and the native culture. It was the contradiction of two cultures that led a miserable ending which made me feel that those Africans can never break the prison of Western culture.

“Postcolonialism is concerned with what exists and happens after the end of colonial rule” (Dobie 186). This was what the situation Salim, the narrator, exactly faced. In this story, he was the only one who had the ability to observe things; moreover, I should say that it was the author who gave him this ability to make readers realize what Africa looks like. Shifting to the lives of others,

Salim’s narration bewildered and attracted me because of his different judgments of the same person. There was always something that could change his thought suddenly. However, Salim himself was judged in this story; he was just an observer. At least, there was no concrete sentence judging him. We were given all the description and details of the place by this astute observer who was introduced to us as an immigrant from an East African Muslim Indian family. This background seemed a little complex at the beginning because we could not easily figure out his position in African society. The background of a person was an important thing because it was a standard that decided one’s fate, that is, to dominate or to be dominated.

With this background, Salim had a nicer life than those natives and was respected by them but he could not compete with the Europeans who were the “real” dominators in African society. Salim said “I was without the religious sense of my family. The insecurity I felt was due to my lack of true religion” (Naipaul 16). What he said showed us one of the main problems in Africa – lost of identity which was another important part in postcolonialism. This thought was one of the reasons that caused Salim to be so pessimistic and made this story

full of sadness. Throughout the story, Salim did not show his struggle toward his own culture because he said he had no hope but he did show others' struggle of creating and keeping their own culture which I am going to discuss as following. Interestingly, after reading *A Bend in the River* I realized that it was the other characters and the entire story that made whom Salim was.

The first impressive character Ferdinand, an intellect African student, was the man who could represent a hope of Africa. As a native, the basic assumptions of postcolonialism could all be seen in his life. He was arrogant and considered himself a more outstanding person than his friends because he could perfectly imitate the Western culture by joining in the New Domain project. This corresponds with what I learned from our textbook that "colonial subjects practice mimicry – imitation of dress, language, behavior, even gestures – instead of resistance" (Dobie 189). On the other hand, he was afraid of losing his own culture, his identity, and everything he had. He did not have a dependable model to teach him or help him find and stable his self-identity. He mimicked different characters to convey that he was a special one in the town.

At the beginning he mimicked Salim and then turned to those Europeans, but in his heart he could not find his position in his society. He always thought he had boundless prospects so that he looked down upon others. He did not know that his confidence and his prospect were composed of another culture which originally does not belonged to him. This was exactly how other Africans felt: they were satisfied with some ridiculous things with their narrow mind and they were also satisfied with living in their own world – a small world. For example, Mahesh, a native who took over the Big Burger franchise in the town, was proud of his career and became arrogant. In fact, his career did not mean anything to the outsiders, including Salim. Although the natives said they wanted to be independent, asserted that they loved their own culture and willing to fight for it, they could not get rid of the effects of Western culture completely. The culture they adopted had already been a hybrid one.

"The analysis of postcolonial literature characteristically explores the complex interactions and antagonisms between native, indigenous, „pre-colonial“ cultures and the imperial cultures imposed on them" (Leitch 26). As a reader, I could feel that they tried to find their self-identities by pretending someone else, and prove their value by showing off something unworthy in those white people's mind. For example, Ferdinand was proud of that he was involved in the New Domain project, which was actually a big lie. It seemed ironic to us. However, such an ironic thing happened all the time in every African character. They never had a viable culture or base of their own; they kept parroting the culture of the oppressor; they had nothing to look back to. Those

people with few cultural values and without technological abilities had no way out except mimicry. This kind of cultural breakdown forced them to make a decision between the traditional culture and Western culture. In this novel, it seemed that they usually choose the Western side.

The contradiction between two cultures rooted in village life and the seemingly modern Westernized city was appalling. Choosing the Western side might also be partly due to the colonial history. "A related line of inquiry in postcolonial theory studies how institutions of Western education function in the spread of imperialism....It helps Western colonizers rule by consent rather than by violence" (Leitch 25). This explained why those Africans could not reject the occupation of Western culture – it had already permeated. After colonial period, they were left with a fragmented society that lacked creative potential, with a society that could not govern itself, a society that needed to be governed by an external power. Just like what Salim described at the beginning, those slaves in his town did not want to change their status; they were accustomed to be governed. For example, Salim's servant who followed him to central Africa was so dependent that he hoped Salim to fulfill his expectation instead of doing it himself. Most people in Africa did like the "peaceful" time before. They actually did not want to change because they thought a revolution would destroy the old regime and bring a worse one with destruction and bloodshed.

In the end of the story, the arrogant Ferdinand appeared as an ordinary, gloomy official. It shown that no matter how hard they tried, the result was the same: they were all controlled by the "Big Man," and he was controlled by those Europeans. This impacted and influenced Salim who escaped in the end. What Salim saw was a hopeless world. It was this world that constructed his pessimistic personality. The author conveyed a message that they could not break down the situation: they were controlled by someone else forever.

Through Salim's description, we could see that the economy and politics were still affected by those foreigners not Africans. (The leader, Big Man, was just a native president in name). It showed the fact that it was very hard to make Africans be independent. "The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it" said Salim (Naipaul 3).

They lost their identities so that there was no place to let them settle down peacefully, neither in Africa nor in the West world. Just like Salim's friend Indar who studied in England, he neither felt Africa was his home nor England. To some degree, Salim's affair with Yvette, a white woman who had husband, had something to do with his self-esteem. This was seen in the latter part of this book. Affecting by the unstable society and people there, he was eager to have a life like those Europeans in



the New Domain. He envied Yvette's husband; therefore, through the affair he had a feeling that he was as good as those white people.

There is an unnoticeable character – Father Huisman who loves to collect African's works of art. He represented those foreigners who seemed to care about Africa. "On other occasions, the „other“ is deemed to have a natural beauty, to be the exotic other" (Dobie 189).

However, what Father Huisman appreciated was originated from the European's view, not African's. There was still Eurocentrism in his mind. Therefore, no one in town really felt what Father Huisman did was gratifying. Furthermore, no one cared about his death at all because he never belonged here.

In this novel, there was a mysterious person called the "Big Man." His name and his pictures appeared everywhere to remind people that he was the first native governor. The most influential thing he had done was building the New Domain, a place for educating the African youth by European teachers, a place represented the hope of real change which appeared and then disappears. However the New Domain actually was a trick that the Big Man reinforced his power in the country. The New Domain was a dreamy place for those villagers but a joke for those foreigners.

Ironically, this place was also an imitation of Western culture. The Big Man just wanted to let people think that he had the ability to bring this country to a superior level as West countries; therefore, he created a dream for villagers. On the other hand, to win people's heart, he had to separate from foreigners. That was why he kept

Raymond, Yvette's husband, at a distance by sending him to govern the New Domain. It did work at first, but Africa consisted of various tribes and there was too much complicated enmity against each other; the president could not control the situation in the end. This aroused another war in central Africa. This showed the "Big Man" exists in name only as long as a crack appears in his power, the civil war is unavoidable.

In the end of this book, Salim escaped from the town because of the war, left everything. He could not do anything but run away. Through Salim's narration, I saw the disquiet of Africa; through Ferdinand's eyes, I saw the

self-esteem and frustration of Africans; through Mahesh's eyes, I saw the limitation of African's world and thoughts.

This book let me see how African preserved their culture with the Western culture's invasion and how people kept living after the invaders left. We can see one kind of result in *A Bend in the River* – doing nothing but running away. The loss of hope came from the lack of cultural and spiritual traditions. The mist appearing in the last page of this book hinted that they could never break out the colonial cage around them. It existed in the bottom of their hearts, their culture no matter in the colonial past or in postcolonial present.

In *A Bend in the River*, the author did not emphasize the race issue like another postcolonial literature. Instead, he enhanced the conflict and contradiction between cultures by portraying the African world. "Colonizers not only physically conquer territories but also practice cultural colonization by replacing the practices and beliefs of the native culture with their own values, governance, law, and belief" (Dobie 188). The culture colonization was what the author wanted to show us. Although Africans did get rid of the physical domination of Western people, they could never get away of spiritual one. "The subject matter of postcolonial literature is marked by its concern for the ambiguity or loss of identity"(187). In fact, globalization had the same result in this century. It was just another name of colonialism. We were affected by other cultures through movies, books, everything around us. We cannot resist this inevitable result. The point is how we find our position when there is no more "pure" culture in this world.

## REFERENCES

- Dobie, Ann B. *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*. Boston: Thomson Learning Inc. 2002. Print.
- Leitch, Vincent B. Ed. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company. 2001. Print.
- Naipaul, V. S. *A Bend in the River*. New York: 1989
- Ramraj, Victor J. "Diasporas and Multiculturalism," *New National and Post-Colonial Literature*, ed. Bruce King. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1996. Print.